

Many faces of a faith

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Inter and intra-faith relationships within 'Hinduism' and the indigenous religions of India

Abstract

Beyond the homogenised version of Hinduism that is used as the current Right Wing ruling party's political interface lies a complex and diverse faith system. Hinduism, which has evolved from Vedic Brahmanism, subsumed many indigenous sects and systems along the way to become the behemoth it is seen to be today. With inherent matrices of discrimination, it has been a perpetrator of many social inequalities, splitting society into many segments while still maintaining that umbrella term of 'Hinduism'. This paper traces these intra-faith relationships against the background of the caste system to understand the present-day conflicts Hinduism has within and outside itself.

Hall of shame



- USCIRF 2019 annual report brands India a CPC
- Based on discriminatory CAA-NRC
- Nation-wide protests
- Allies from all communities to support Muslims
- India's diplomatic denial of such conditions

The return of 'Ravan'



- Dalit hero for Muslims
- The 'Ravan' moniker
- Who is Ravan and what does it mean in the Hindu discourse?

Bhim Army chief, Chandrashekhar Azad 'Ravan' at the CAA protest in Jama Masjid in Delhi, February 2019. Image via | Indian Express

Counter-culture movements



Ravana puja | image via jagran.com



Adoration of Mahabali on Onam | image via travel.manoramaonline.com



Mahishasura worship | image via navbharattimes.indiatimes.com

Idea of indigeneity in India



- Adivasis or Vanavasis are thought to be the indigenous people of India
- Depressed classes: DBA (Dalits + Bahujans + Adivasis)
- Little or no attention given
- Growing Sarna movement of Jharkhand

A group of Adivasi women from Jharkhand, India | image via prabhasakshi.com

Brief history of Hinduism: Harappans or Aryans?



(L to R) The Pashupati seal, the Swastika seal and an archaeological excavation site from the IVC | image via myindiamyglory.com



An illustration of a Vedic fire sacrifice with officiating Brahmin priests and Kshatriya patrons | image via historyshories.com

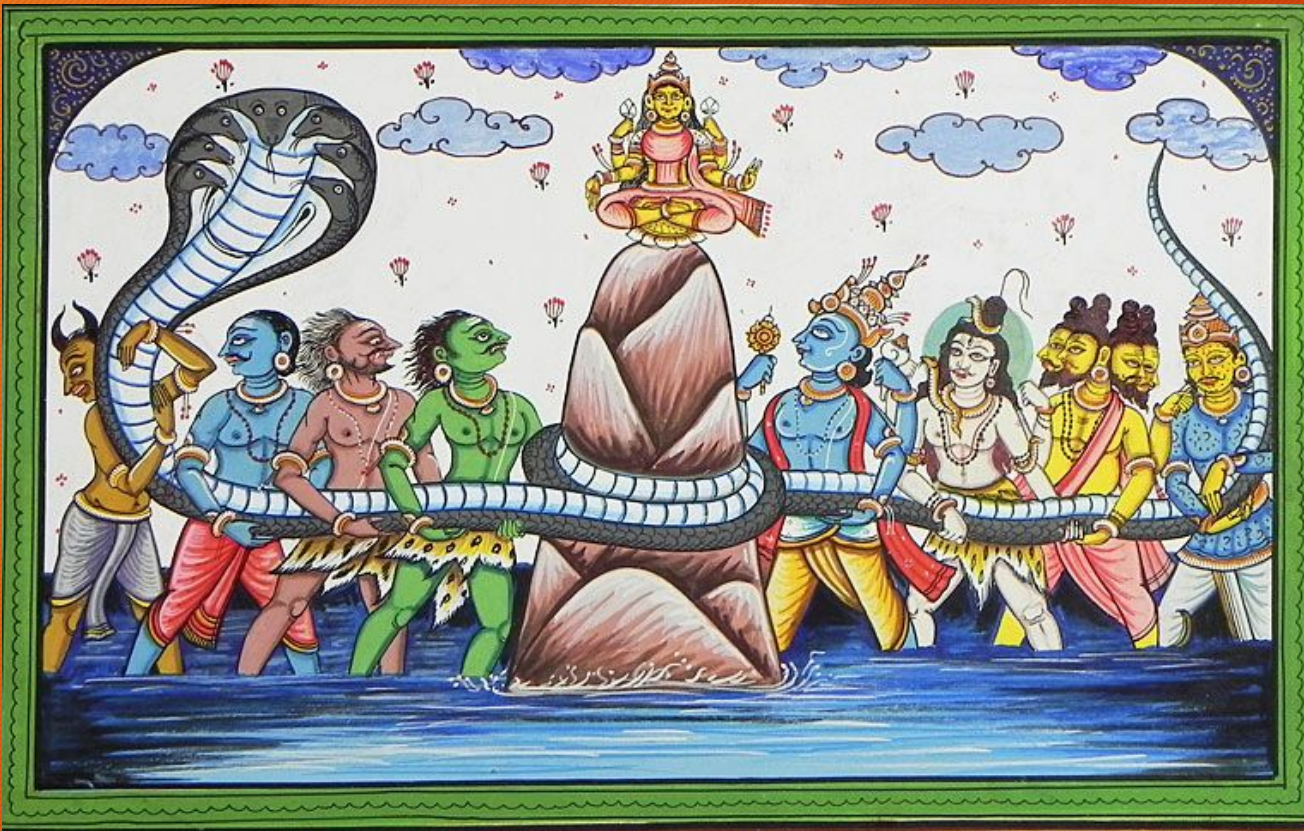
From Vedic to Puranic Hinduism



The Brihadeeshwara temple built during the Chola dynasty |
Image via Wikipedia

- From pastoral to agricultural economy
- From sacrifice-based to temple-based worship
- From Vedas to Puranas
- New pantheon of gods
- Popular and accessible ritual forms

Geopolitical extent and us/them divide



- Aryan rulers were concentrated in the Indo-Gangetic plain in the north
- Anything beyond the Vindhyas were *anaryas*
- Aryans Vs. Dasas/ Dasyus
- Aryan agenda of civilizing the ‘dark-skinned’ *dasyus* in different myths and legends
- Reverse Brahminisation by Shankaracharya

The Puranic story of churning of the ocean typifies the Arya/Dravida split as Devas (gods) and Asuras (demons) | Image via DollsofIndia.com

Major competitors of Hinduism



Hinduism perceived/ perceives three religions as its major competitors

- Buddhism (ancient period)
- Islam (medieval period)
- Christianity (modern period)

A triptych of the prophets Muhammad, Christ and Buddha (L-R) | Image vargagallery.com

Hindu/ Brahmin tactics of co-option and supersession



- Textual strategies: e.g. Puranic stories of *dashavatara*
- Ritual strategies: e.g. easy and accessible rituals like fasting, pilgrimage, festivals
- Social and structural strategies: e.g. mimicking Buddhism's monasticism and temple-building + Sanatana Dharma

The *dashavatara* or 10 incarnations theory of Vishnu co-opts Buddhism by declaring Buddha as one of the 10 (circled)| Image vedaboys.com

The basis of Brahmin hegemony



- Mythological ‘superior’ origin story
- Social + cultural capital = economic welfare
- Ideas of purity and pollution
- Varna/ jati classification
- Opportunities in the Colonial period due to Western education

A representation of the Vedic myth of creation that puts Brahmins at the top of the social pyramid | Image via BBC

Challenges to Brahmin hegemony



- Conversions - into Islam, Christianity and Buddhism (Navayana of Ambedkar)
- Reformation - social reformers like Gandhi, Phule, Periyar, Amte and Bhakti saints
- Alternative faith systems - resembling Hinduism but shunning caste discriminations

Each year, thousands of Dalits convert to Buddhism in mass ceremonies | Image via Rediff.com

A moment of reckoning?



Muslims, women and students took part in the CAA-NRC protests in large numbers in India towards the end of 2019| Image via newsd.in

- The CAA-NRC protests took on an anti-fascist turn
- Reclamation of identities
- Muslims refuse to be treated as second-class citizens by Hindus
- Hindutva $\neq$ Hinduism
- Jains & Buddhists $\neq$ Hindus
- Adivasis $\neq$ Hindus

Thank you!

